

# Helping Your Garden Grow



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## Tips on Composting

For years conventional gardeners have viewed soil as an inert substance for plant roots and a sponge for chemical fertilizer. But organic gardeners know our soil is alive, and it depends on us to feed it. Our plants require healthy soil for nutrition, minerals and water retention to thrive. How much life is in the soil? A teaspoon of good garden soil may contain a billion bacteria, a million fungi, and ten thousand amoebae! Along with the larger decomposers like worms, sow bugs, millipedes and other insects, we have the life of our soil. Now, to feed these organisms, we need organic matter to create a habitat where they can live and reproduce. What is that habitat? A compost pile.

To make good hot compost you need more than just kitchen scraps—you also need a good supply of leaves, straw and fresh green plants to mix with your kitchen waste. Your pile also needs to be at least three feet high by three feet wide, so that it will hold heat and moisture. It is best to gather all of your materials at once and build a pile that can cook for a few weeks and not be disturbed. You may need



an area next to your pile as a holding area as you produce more organic material. Before you begin building the pile, remember to chop, chop, chop—the smaller the material, the sooner your decomposers can get to work.

My favorite tool for chopping is the machete. Once the material is ready, I like to turn on a sprinkler, so that as I add the ingredients they are getting wet at the same time. The best way to tell that your pile is working is through the temperature. Two to three days after building your pile, you should be able to feel heat coming out of the middle when you hold your hand over it. As your temperature slows to 100 or below, your organisms will need air. It's time to flip the pile over, and it will heat up again. At this point you will not have worms in your pile; this early, work is mostly done by bacteria and fungi. The worms will show up in a month or so, once the pile has cooled off and resembles soil—that's when you know it's done.

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